Curiosity

may have killed the cat; more likely  
the cat was just unlucky, or else curious  
to see what death was like, having no cause  
to go on licking paws, or fathering  
litter on litter of kittens, predictably.  
  
Nevertheless, to be curious  
is dangerous enough. To distrust  
what is always said, what seems  
to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams,  
leave home, smell rats, have hunches  
do not endear cats to those doggy circles  
where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches  
are the order of things, and where prevails  
much wagging of incurious heads and tails.  
Face it. Curiosity  
will not cause us to die--  
only lack of it will.  
Never to want to see  
the other side of the hill  
or that improbable country  
where living is an idyll  
(although a probable hell)  
would kill us all.  
Only the curious  
have, if they live, a tale  
worth telling at all.  
  
Dogs say cats love too much, are irresponsible,  
are changeable, marry too many wives,  
desert their children, chill all dinner tables  
with tales of their nine lives.  
Well, they are lucky. Let them be  
nine-lived and contradictory,  
curious enough to change, prepared to pay  
the cat price, which is to die  
and die again and again,  
each time with no less pain.  
A cat minority of one  
is all that can be counted on  
to tell the truth. And what cats have to tell  
on each return from hell  
is this: that dying is what the living do,  
that dying is what the loving do,  
and that dead dogs are those who do not know  
that dying is what, to live, each has to do.

Alastair Reed

“Curiosity” Explication

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The poem “Curiosity” by Alastair Reid is an incredibly witty poem that plays off the saying “curiosity killed the cat.” The poem depicts some of the traits that allow individuals to live life to their fullest. The poem makes a brilliant play off the saying “curiosity killed the cat.” “Curiosity” emphasizes the importance of living as a self-sufficient individual who is not controlled by the grasps of society. The poem compares two different kinds of people: one who lives life to its fullest by taking chances and one who hides behind the walls of society and always takes the safe route. It uses cats and dogs to symbolize each type of view on life; cats are the self-determining risk takers while the dogs are the monotonic conservatives. “Curiosity” uses many forms of literary devices such as; title, symbols, connotation, denotation, musical devices, and imagery to explain that in order to live life to its fullest, it is important to take risks and not be influenced by social pressures.

The first literary device that develops a theme is the connotation and denotation of the title. The denotation of the word “Curiosity” is the desire to learn about anything. The denotation of this word describes the personality and viewpoints of the cats. They are adventurous, spontaneous, and are not afraid to contradict society. The connotation of “Curiosity,” in relevance to the poem and its meaning, is a positive characteristic that describes a way of life The poem describes curiosity as the ability “to distrust / what is always said, what seems / to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams” (6-8). To be curious is to always question authority and to refuse to conform. The “curious” cats in this poem represent the kind of people who enjoy life on their own terms and avoid the confinements of society. On the other end of the spectrum, dogs are not inquisitive and are meant to represent the kind of people who do the accepted things and go with the flow. The word “Curiosity” can be interpreted thematically as the ability to take risks.

“Curiosity” relies heavily on symbols in order to create a theme and maintain its poetic features. The symbols that make “Curiosity” such a clever poem are the use of cats and dogs to represent two extremes of society. Cats, independent by nature, correspond to an existentialists view point. Meanwhile, the dogs, loyal conformists, embody the typical norms of society which dislike change. The dogs accuse the cats of violating social laws and say that they are irresponsible (27-29). Meanwhile, the dogs have “well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches,” which means that they have a rather proper and conservative connotation (12). These animals are symbols because they are literally describing the attitudes of cats and dogs; however, they also portray different outlooks on life. The symbols used in this poem maintain an interesting plot while providing a much deeper interpretation and meaning. At first glance the poem presents an entertaining comparison between the behaviors of cats and dogs. After considering the symbols, the poem obviously illustrates a very important aspect of human life: to live life with no regrets. Therefore, it is essential to take advantage of all opportunities. The combination of the surface and symbolic nature of the poem is what makes the theme so potent.

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In “Curiosity,” the word “die” has an alternating connotation throughout the poem. The consistent denotation on the word “die” is the act of death or to cease to exist. However, the connotation of the word completely changes throughout the poem. In the third stanza, “Curiosity / will not cause us to die-- / only lack of it will,” the connotation of the word “die” is better understood if “die” were changed to the phrase “not live life to its fullest “(15-17).These three lines are conveying the idea that in order to live a fulfilling life, one must take chances, the lack of curiosity will only lead to a life full of regret. Furthermore, the connotation of the word “die” or “dying”, changes at the end of the poem. In the final stanza, the poem states, "that dying is what the living do, / that dying is what the loving do,” which exhibits a different connotation of the word “dying” (40-41). In this part of the poem the word “dying” is used to represent risk taking. Once again, the poem refers to the theme when it states that in order to live and love, one must be adventurous and live without regrets.

“Curiosity” implements many musical devices in order to maintain structural fluidity as well as a clever tone. The common musical devices in this poem are assonance, consonance, and approximate rhymes. The combinations of these musical devices are what give the poem a bold musical orientation. There is assonance and consonance in the segment, “what is always said, what seems / to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams.” (7-8) The words “seems” and “dreams” are both assonance and consonance The assonance is the “ee” sound in the middle of the word, while the consonance is the “zz” sound at the end of each word. There are a few cases of approximate rhymes used in an attempt to connect certain musical elements of the poem. It is possible to connect the bold rhyming style with the meaning of the poem. The bold yet witty rhymes show that one must create a unique style that expresses ones feelings in order to truly be independent.

“Curiosity” has conveyed a powerful message that describes how to fulfill one’s life. The many literary elements of this poem have been cleverly combined in order to form an efficient poem. The connotation and denotation of specific words have assisted in the understanding of many of the symbols. The symbols within this poem are the most essential elements in forming a combined meaning. The musical devises utilized in “curiosity” connect all of the literary elements into one fluent and structural poem. The combined networks of literary elements are necessary for developing theme that can be interpreted by the reader.

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Work cited

Reid , Alastair. "Curiosity." *Perrines Literature Strucure, sound, and sense.* Eds. Thomas Arp and Greg Johnson. 9th ed. Boston: Thompson Wadsworth, 2006. 749-50. Print.

